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Mithras and Mithraism

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Worshipped in windowless cave-like temples or natural caves, across the Roman Empire by exclusively male (Clauss 1992; Griffith 2006) congregations, few ancient deities have aroused more curiosity than the sun god Mithras. His name and the Phrygian cap betray his oriental origins. A god Mitra was invoked as early as the 14th century BCE in a treaty between Mitanni and the Hittites, found at Hattuša (CIMRM, 16), and is also widely attested in ancient Persia and India (Merkelbach 1984: 9-39). Where and when this deity became the central figure of a mystery cult, and how much or how little it retained of its pre-Roman roots, has been the subject of much academic debate. Few modern scholars (e.g. Mastrocinque 2009: 42-45) have given credence to Plutarch's (Vit. Pomp. 24,5) claim that the secret rites of Mithras were invented by pirates at Olympos in Lycia in the early 1st century BCE, as the earliest certain evidence for the Roman Mithras mysteries does not emerge before the late 1st century CE (Beck 2004: 34-35; Clauss 2000: 4, 21-22). A cave at Doliche in Commagene, sheltering two mithraea, may form an exception. While stratified finds were far and few between, the excavators argue persuasively that they postdate the cave's use as a quarry and suggest that it was adapted for Mithraic worship some time in the late 1st century BCE or the 1st century CE (Schütte-Maischatz and Winter 2004: 79-195). Whether or not Commagene was the birthplace of the Mithras mysteries, at least parts of the belief system originated in the Near East (e.g. Beck 2004: 31-44; 295-329). Italy formed a springboard for the cult's expansion to the Empire's northern provinces.

From the 2nd to the 4th century CE Mithraism was amongst the most popular mystery cults in the Roman Empire, winning numerous converts in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the Near East and Northern Africa. Contrary to popular belief, soldiers constituted only c. 10% of known votaries (Clauss 1992; Piccottini 1994). The cult flourished particularly at cosmopolitan places, such as Rome, Ostia and the Empire's frontier zones, where the population was exposed to, and more open-minded towards, a wide range of foreign religious influences.

Due to the secret nature of the ceremonies, reflected in the architecture of the artificially lighted places of worship, little is known about the Mithraic belief system. While the odd passage in Christian or Neoplatonic literature sheds light on the cult, disentangling factual information from the authors' world-views is far from straightforward.

Messages encoded in Mithraic art, while free from such external bias, can only in part be deciphered. As central as a crucifix in a medieval or modern church was a tauroctony relief, featuring Mithras killing the bull, in a mithraeum. The bull and symbols arranged around this sacrificial victim stand for constellations within a definable section of the skies. The mithraeum epitomises the universe and, with its associated imagery, the descent of human souls into mortality and their ascent into immortality (Beck 2004; 2006). Yet, the message of the tauroctony is not confined to astronomical symbolism. The creatures benefitting from the bodily fluids of the dying bull and corn-ears growing out of its tail or stab wound also symbolise life coming out of death. A graffito on the walls of the St Prisca mithraeum in Rome, stating '*and you have saved us by shedding the eternal blood*', can only refer to this act of salvation (Vermaseren and Van Essen 1965: 217-21). This was commemorated through a banquet, featuring the slain bull, grapes and rolls of bread, Mithras and the sun god,

Sol, or the votaries, sometimes holding drinking horns (Clauss 2000: 108-13), a ceremony resembling Christian Communion. Justin (*Apol.* 1,66) and Tertullian (*De praescrip. haeret.* 40,4) refer to an offering of bread, the latter author also attesting that the 'idea of a resurrection' featured in Mithraic belief. Similar to other religions originating in the Orient, Mithraism also seems to have offered a clear moral compass and a sharp differentiation between good and evil (Merkelbach 1984: 188-93; Sauer 1996: 77-78; Gawlikowski 2007). There was much else to make Mithraism attractive, ranging from the use of fragrances, light and sound effects to catering for social and spiritual needs. Where the cult was popular several small temples were built and no large cathedral-like mithraeum. This preserved a familiar atmosphere amongst the votaries, who took part in communal ceremonies, resting on two benches, separated by the temple's central aisle. A minority of initiates into the Mithras mysteries were assigned to one of seven grades, from raven (*corax*) to father (*pater*); the majority do not appear to have belonged to any particular grade (Clauss 2000: 131-40).

In common with dedications to most other pagan deities, there are far fewer Mithraic inscriptions of the 4th century than of 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. Coin offerings in sizeable quantities in many mithraea in Gaul, Germany, the Danube provinces, as well as Hawarte in Syria, in some cases at least clustering in front of the cult image, prove that Mithras remained popular until the late 4th century CE, when base metal coinage disappeared from circulation (Martens and De Boe 2004). While Mithraism is sometimes seen as a religion of loyalty (Merkelbach 1984: 153-88), a cult whose fortunes depended crucially on imperial favouritism (e.g. Mastrocinque 2009: 13-23, 112-14), the archaeological evidence for widespread popular devotion under Christian emperors in the 4th century CE suggests that there was more to it. Iconoclastic attacks, sometimes deliberately directed against Mithraic monuments, sometimes against anything pagan, demonstrate that direct Christian intervention played a significant part in the cult's eventual demise (Sauer 1996; 2003).

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Figures:

1. The Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra at Ostia with the typical two benches and a replica of the statue of Mithras killing the bull.
2. Map of coin deposits in mithraea in the north-western provinces of the Roman Empire.